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AUTHOR	Gray, Richard, Jr.; Wheeldreyer, Laura
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ABSTRACT

The Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) serves the highest number of low income and special needs students in the state, struggling to create effective educational environments that respond to students' social and economic needs. While there have been many restructuring efforts through the BCPSS' history, the modern era of school reform began in the late 1980s, when a for-profit educational services company received a contract to manage nine schools. However, it did not consult the community, and under extreme political and community pressure, the mayor declared it a failure. Race was, and remains, a central issue in BCPSS school politics. Community-based organizations to improve public education are a relatively new phenomena in Baltimore City. ACORN Baltimore builds the power of low and moderate income neighborhood constituents so they can transform their communities, adopting a direct approach to parent organizing. The Southeast Education Taskforce (SET) produces recommendations for changes needed in southeast Baltimore schools, focusing on the mutually supportive relationship between families, communities, and schools. Both ACORN and SET believe that parent and community perspectives are crucial in public education. Both have established productive relationships with university-based partners. Obstacles to their success include uncertain, changing political environments and tentative, inexperienced school leadership. (SM)

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COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM IN BALTIMORE

Richard Gray Jr.
Laura Wheeldreyer

Institute for Education and Social Policy
New York University
August 2001

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CONTEXT

Baltimore City

Baltimore is located the mid-Atlantic region of North America just off the Chesapeake Bay along the mouth of the Patapsco River. Only 30 minutes north of the District of Columbia, Baltimore has the feel of an industrial, northern city and the character of a small, southern town. Baltimore's small town qualities are nurtured by the strong loyalty of its residents to their neighborhoods

Despite that strong neighborhood loyalty, Baltimore City lost about a third of it population over the last 40 years, dropping from a little less than 1,000,000 in the 1950's to its current population of 650,000. The drop in population was the result of a loss of city manufacturing industries and a growth of business and jobs (mostly service-oriented) in the surrounding counties. These changes in Baltimore's economy resulted in a flow of money and resources out of the city.

These dynamics have left Baltimore with a higher percentage of low-income residents and fewer resources as the city faces many of the challenges common to urban settings, particularly with regard to its children. Currently, the City of Baltimore has a higher percentage of poor children then any other town or city in the state. From 1970 to 1990, Baltimore's share of poor children in the metropolitan area (which includes Baltimore City and the surrounding counties) almost doubled. Over that same period, Baltimore City's share of the metropolitan area's income decreased by more than 25%. The combined effect of these changes force Baltimore to strain for resources at the same time it must meet a growing demand for services.

Like many other cities, the change in Baltimore's population reflects the impact of white flight from the city. However, Baltimore's white flight had some unique characteristics. In other cities the departure of whites was rapid, often marked by large surges of white exit, and was completed or had slowed significantly by the 1970's. While Baltimore's white flight was not as fast as other cities, it was fairly steady over the last 30-40 years and continued well into the 1990's. In fact, a limited, but fairly significant level of white and black middle-class flight from the city still persists. Because of this steady and persistent population change, government agencies, community organizations and residents constantly struggle to figure out what kind of city is Baltimore becoming, rather than what kind of city Baltimore has become.

Today, African Americans make up a majority of the city's population (64.3%) followed by whites (31.6%). There is a small, but growing Asian (1.5%) and Latino (1.7%) popula tion in the city, as well as a growing number of immigrants.

The Baltimore City Public School System

The Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) is the 23rd largest school district in the country and the fourth largest district in the State of Maryland. Serving a student population of approximately 106,000, grades pre-K through 12, BCPSS employs approximately 7,000 FTE teachers in 182 schools.

Like the city, BCPSS serves the highest number of low income and special needs students in the state. 71% of BCPSS students are eligible for free/reduced priced meals; 76% of students are eligible for Title I services and 17.5% of students are eligible for special education services. As in many urban centers, Baltimore City schools struggle to create an effective educational environment that is also responsive to the social and economic needs of students. [1]

The Baltimore Public School System

Number of schools: 182
- 104 elementary schools
- 19 extended elementary schools (K-8)
- 25 middle schools
- 18 zoned and citywide high schools
- 9 special education centers
- 7 alternative schools

Number of students: 105,882
- 87.2% African American
- 11.3% White
- 1.5% Other

Data sources: Baltimore City School District.

Education Alternative, Inc.

While there have been many restructuring efforts throughout the history of BCPSS, the modern era of school reform in Baltimore started in the late 1980's with the election of Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke. During his campaign, Mayor Schmoke asked the city to judge his administration on a single issue--improving the city schools. But once in office, the mayor confronted a system with inadequate and dwindling resources, high-need students, poorly prepared teachers and bloated bureaucracies.

To generate system improvement, Mayor Schmoke felt he needed to be open to new, bold and innovative ways to provide education services in the city. The Mayor and his newly appointed superintendent, Dr. Walter G. Amprey, implemented a controversial initiative to privatize the city's schools. Education Alternatives Inc. (EAI), a for-profit educational services company, received a city contract to manage nine schools. The experiment was touted as an opportunity to give more

[1] The large number of poor students has had a dramatic effect of the staffing structure of the school system. Over the last 50 years, BCPS student enrollment has decreased by 5% from 112,000 to 106,000. Over that same period of time the number of BCPS employees has increased by 219%. A large part of the reason Baltimore has a larger bureaucracy than suburban districts is that it takes more people to run the federal, state and city programs designed to serve the needs of the growing number of student from low income communities.

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power and resources to the schools to test innovative practices and create support networks for student and school staff, with the promise of dramatic gains in student achievement.

The mayor built a broad coalition to support his reform efforts, including the Baltimore Teachers Union (AFT affiliate). To secure the their support, the union was assured that the teachers, not EAI, could choose who would stay in the EAI-run schools and who would be transferred to other positions in the system.

However, once EAI took charge, it transferred teacher's aides out of the schools and replaced them with college interns. As a result of the move, the union withdrew its support for the project. Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD)[2], an Industrial Areas Foundation affiliate based in the city, as well as the city's Black clergy, criticized the mayor for failing to consult the community fully about the EAI program. But with the loss of union support and the opposition of BUILD and much of the Black community leadership in the city, the mayor's education coalition crumbled.

Under extreme political and community pressure, the mayor declared that EAI's reforms had failed to deliver the promised dramatic improvements by any measure, although EAI was only halfway through its original five-year contract and had only two years of tests data. The experiment was dead.

The EAI experiment illustrates the centrality of race to Baltimore school politics. While supporters of the EAI program were able to allay community concerns about the EAI plan, support for the initiative, particularly from the Black community, was tempered with skepticism and questions about motive. When EAI decisions resulted in job loss unanticipated by the community, the program quickly became perceived by many as a private takeover attempt of the public schools and a direct challenge to the existing public school leadership.

The EAI program also presented a potential threat to the first arena in which Blacks developed political power at a city level--the Baltimore City School System. Whites had left the Baltimore schools long before and much more rapidly than they left the city. The school system achieved a Black student majority in 1960—20 years before the city itself became majority Black. Black political support of William Donald Schaefer's mayoral campaign in 1970 resulted in a number of appointments for Blacks as school administrators, principals and other administrators and teachers in the school system. Consequently, Blacks were able to achieve and maintain a level of power and

[2] BUILD, a broad-based community organization whose members include more than 40 churches and congregations, labor organizations and other associations, has had an interest in education organizing for a number of years. From the late 80's through the early 90's, BUILD organized in communities to put school reform on the political map and collaborated with the mayor on such issues as site-based management, school-to-work and school-to-college issues.

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influence in the politics of the school system that they were not able to achieve in other city agencies[3].

The school system is also among the largest employers in the city, and Blacks hold more than 70% of the jobs in the system. By removing teacher aides, EAI failed to recognize the challenge it was posing to the historic economic role the school system played and continues to play in Baltimore's communities.

While the political dynamics in the city are complex, the school system's status as the first center of Black power in the city remains strong. Major changes in the school system are inevitability tied to a perception of change in Black influence in the city. Black residents are often torn between wanting changes in the school system and not wanting those changes to adversely affect and impact the racial power dynamics in the city.

Senate Bill 795

In the midst of the EAI battle, Mayor Schmoke was preparing to fight for more state education aid. The Maryland General Assembly was pressuring the city to make major school reforms and improve student outcomes. The City, however, felt that state mandates for reform were depleting Baltimore's already limited education budget. Schmoke and the American Civil Liberties Union separately sued the state.

The state fought back, claiming that the city was running a dangerously ineffective and inefficient system. Eventually, a settlement was reached. Mayor Schmoke agreed to landmark changes in the school system that shocked the Black community and signaled the twilight of his political career. The mayor's loss of power and political capital in education paved the way for the next era of Baltimore school reform.

In 1997, the state legislature passed Senate Bill 795(SB 795). SB 795, a document outlining broad reforms of the Baltimore City Public School System, and codifying the mutually agreed upon (by both the City and State) settlement to the city and ACLU lawsuits. SB 795 created a city-state partnership, reorganized BCPSS and also gave some extra financial support to carry out mandated reforms. Additionally, the new reform bill replaced the Superintendent with the new positions of Chief Executive Officer, Chief Academic Officer, and Chief Financial Officer.

The bill also created a new, nine-member Board of School Commissioners, jointly appointed by the governor and the mayor. The new board developed and is in the process of implementing a "Master

[3]For example, Baltimore appointed its first Black Superintendent, Roland Patterson, in 1971. The Baltimore City School Board became majority Black in 1973. But, Baltimore's first Black mayor was not elected until 1987; the first head of the City Planning Department would not be appointed until 1991; and the first Black Fire Chief would not be appointed until 1993.

Plan" to improve student achievement and establish effective management systems. This systemic reform initiative has been in place for four years and an independent evaluation has been initiated to assess progress made.

City- State politics are complex and contentious. Over 85 of Baltimore's 182 schools are on the state's reconstitution-eligible list for low-performance. In spring 2000, the Maryland State Department of Education decided to reconstitute three schools and turned them over to the for-profit Edison Company to run. The State gave Edison significantly more funding than other city schools, which angered parents, school board members, and elected officials, who still remember the EAI experiment.

In spring 2001, the new CEO, Carmen V. Russo, in a move to keep the state from taking over any additional schools, announced the creation of a CEO's District (similar to the Chancellor's District in New York) for low-performing schools. She went one step further and reconstituted another Baltimore City School, determined to show the state that she could make bold reform choices. This newly reconstituted school has been contracted to Victory Schools, a non-profit educational management organization. Its non-profit status allows CEO Russo to avoid much of the criticism and political pressure focused on the Edison takeovers.

ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM IN BALTIMORE

Community-based organizations and associations organizing to improve public education are a relatively new phenomenon in Baltimore City. Significant strides have been made by parents, community groups, civic organizations and others attempting to increase the attention given to improving poor performing schools in Baltimore City. However, individuals and groups engaged in school reform constantly struggle to figure out who has the power, resources and capacity to generate system-wide school improvement in a constantly changing political, economic and social context. This report will briefly review the work of two groups-- ACORN Baltimore and the Southeast Education Taskforce—each of which take very different approaches to answering that question of who can generate school reform.

ACORN

ACORN Baltimore (hereafter referred to as ACORN) devotes its resources to building the power of low and moderate-income neighborhood constituents so that they can transform their communities. ACORN initiates major campaigns designed to change public policy to improve the lives and neighborhoods of low and moderate-income people. In addition to addressing issues like predatory lending practices and lead paint removal from public housing units, ACORN added education organizing to its agenda in early 1999. Currently, ACORN employs 8 organizers in the Patterson, Rosemont, Park Heights, Clifton, and Greenmount/Barclay neighborhoods, as well as other communities in Southwest Baltimore.

ACORN adopts a very direct approach to parent organizing for school reform. While employing an array of tactics that include negotiation and lobbying, ACORN believes that confronting decision-makers, face-to-face, often brings the most powerful results. "We run direct action, issue-based campaigns," explains Mitch Klein, ACORN's Head Organizer, "that create the space for ACORN members to make demands for school improvement."

As a membership-driven organization, ACORN members speak for themselves, set the organizing agenda and choose the issues to be addressed by campaigns. Members also pay for a significant portion of the organization's expenses through members' dues, raffles, ad sales, dinners, and other events. Currently, about 50% of ACORN's budget is generated from dues and events.

Many ACORN members are new to community activism. By participating in actions, events or training programs, new members learn skills and tactics that build their capacity as organizers. They are, in turn, asked to apply those skills to planning the organization's direction and activities. Leadership and skill development is at the core of ACORN's organizing process.

ACORN believes the skills of their membership are most powerful and effective when exercised through direct action campaigns. "Direct action" means publicly and energetically focusing the resources and energy of the organization to pressure a school, the school system or some other target that will grant demands for more effective public schools. Using techniques such as sit-ins, marches, petitioning, and filing lawsuits, ACORN teaches and utilizes a wide range of direct action tactics.

The content of ACORN campaigns, the organizing issues and demands, come out of one-on-one meetings between the organizer and parents, as well as broader listening campaigns conducted by ACORN organizers and core leaders with community residents. ACORN members, organizers and parent leaders distill key issues out of those meetings, give parents and residents access to information that helps them better comprehend why those issues are occurring in their neighborhood schools, and help craft action agendas that help people act directly to change the conditions of the schools in their community and the city. These action agendas are not only the foundation of the direct action activities, but also the public statement of purpose used by ACORN members and staff to build a base of support from other parents and residents in the community. Currently, ACORN has a base of over 400 parents working on education issues through the city.

To build its organizational capacity, ACORN provides training to its organizing staff and membership. Staff training is conducted every week on needs and issued identified by the organizers. Training issues include:

- Understanding ACORN organizing philosophy;
- Meeting facilitation;
- Effective outreach; and
- Issues and topics raised directly from community actions.

The training sessions are developed and implemented by a mix of ACORN senior staff and outside experts.

ACORN members get similar training. "ACORN runs one and two-day sessions for their leaders to bring them up to speed on the issues being addressed by our organizing campaigns, " notes Mr. Klein. ACORN is currently planning a six-week leadership development program on the basics of city and state government

After the release of ACORN's report of *Teacher Quality and Poor Communities*, the Baltimore City Paper conducted its own analysis using the ACORN report and additional Census data. The City Paper found that:

- 31% of all Baltimore teachers are uncertified
- 94% of all uncertified teachers are in schools in Zip Codes where the per capita income is less than $16,702, the Baltimore "living wage," the income necessary to keep a family of four above the federal poverty line
- 45% of all uncertified teachers are in schools where the per capita income is less than $10,718, the yearly earnings of someone working full time for the federal minimum wage

"The findings [from the ACORN report on Teacher experience and certification] have sparked intense debate among those with the biggest stake in Baltimore's schools...School officials are scrambling to offer explanations and solutions, even as they acknowledge that the disparity will likely persist well into Baltimore's future."

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(particularly on how and where decisions are made), the basics of organizing and education reform issues.

ACORN works on a variety of small and large issues simultaneously, to keep members involved and excited. People join to tackle a particular issue, but then, through dialogue with other parents, they begin to see the connection between their concerns and the concerns of other parents, which often pushes them to get involved in others issues. "Some groups take two years to build a campaign," remarks Mr. Klein. "ACORN is much faster at getting campaigns started. We put a lot of thought into where we can build groups quickly to the point where they are acting on their issues, not just talking about them." The issues that have immerged from this process include:

- Technology, particularly the digital divide in rich and poor schools;
- School and library closings;
- Adequate supplies/books;
- Teacher quality and experience;
- Class size.

Additionally, ACORN tries to increase access to information and data about schools by helping parents analyze school budgets, test scores and demographic information. By breaking down this information, ACORN helps parents get a clearer picture about the conditions of their children's school and the performance of the school district. Through the use of data, parents and communities can better understand the problems affecting their children's school experience and construct demands for change that address their children's educational needs.

Teacher experience and school performance data were central in the development of ACORN's campaign on teacher quality in poor Baltimore neighborhoods. While working on a campaign against public housing fraud ACORN organizers encountered many community residents citing problems with the low performance of their neighborhood schools. Through one-on-one meetings, door knocking and community gatherings with parents, questions surfaced about the experience level of teachers in poor performing schools.

Using the state's Public Information Act, ACORN obtained teacher training and degree information and test scores broken-down by zip code. Working with John Beam of the National Center for School and Communities, who helped to crunch the numbers, ACORN issued a report showing a correlation between uncertified teachers in schools and the test performance of students. ACORN is now developing a citywide campaign to address this issue.

After some trial and error, ACORN has created a model for education organizing they believe will have the greatest impact on the conditions of low performing schools in Baltimore. At first, ACORN concentrated their organizing at the school level, but then decided that school-based organizing was not getting to the root causes of poor schools. As Mitch Klein remarks, "When you start [organizing]

at the school level, it is hard not to get pigeonholed into individual schools and their individual problems, which really does not get you to the root causes of why schools are doing so poorly." Now, ACORN make an effort to connect neighborhood school issues to citywide campaigns aimed at producing systemic changes in schools throughout the city. "We try to build a constituency and attack macro issues at the system level in order to get real accountability and progress in all schools," says Mitch Klein.

ACORN had an opportunity to apply their citywide organizing approach in response to the school system's recent proposal to close nine public schools. ACORN members and organizers worked with parents, who were focused on fighting individual school closings, to develop a citywide campaign to address the BCPS proposal. Additionally, they reached out to advocacy and community groups opposing a proposed closing of 11 libraries to join forces against the closings. 150 ACORN members and others packed St. John's Lutheran Evangelical Church to hear ACORN board members and affected children and parents speak against the closings. Demands were presented to representatives from the school district and library board.

ACORN members won a meeting with the City's Library Director during which they demanded no closures, more outreach, expanded services, and a representative board. "We probably won't win on the school closings, but we forced the issue and made ACORN's voice heard," states Mitch Klein. "Libraries, on the other hand, look winnable. Now the city is saying no libraries will be closed in the next year and they are going back to the drawing board." From ACORN's viewpoint, members' experience of success increases their sense of power, their commitment to the group, and renews their sense of hope that schools will improve.

ACORN's report reiterates what the school system fully understands: We need a solid, well-prepared teaching force that can help all our children achieve their potential.

Carmen V. Russo
C.E.O./Baltimore City Schools

As it looks for ways to create systemic change in city schools, ACORN has reached out to local unions for possible alliances. ACORN is now working closely with AFSCME (the city workers union of Baltimore) and the Baltimore Federation of Teachers to protest cuts in libraries, schools, and jobs. Most of the rank and file members of AFSCME, which has major units within the school system (teacher's aids, teachers, custodians, or cafeteria workers), send their children to Baltimore City schools and have a demographic composition similar to ACORN's current membership. ACORN is hoping that combining the power of these unions with ACORN's membership will increase the involvement and morale of both parents and school system staffers, and provide significant energy to education organizing and system reform activities in Baltimore. ACORN will also be exploring similar relationships with the Hotel Employees Union and UNITE, the textile and needle workers union.

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ACORN defines its success in Baltimore as being the key pacesette: in setting a new agenda for issues in the city, and having changed the conversation about priorities amongst low-income and African-American communities, as well as with city leaders.

What's Next For ACORN?

For the next two years ACORN will be focusing on the following key short-term goals:'

- Recruit 1000 new parents into the organization; develop parent committees in three neighborhoods drawing from some 25 schools to be known as the "ACORN Zone;"
- Identify 100 new parent leaders through a series of weekend trainings followed by intensive leadership development (development by doing);
- Develop two major citywide education campaigns on such issues as teacher recruitment and training, small schools and resource/funding equity;
- Lay the groundwork for a consortium of organizations to work together for long-term education reform and enhanced low-income citizen representation in education policy;
- Cultivate an effective grassroots campaign at the state level to make Baltimore City education funding reform a top legislative priority in Annapolis.

Southeast Education Taskforce

The Southeast Education Taskforce (SET) was formed during a 1992 community planning process for neighborhood revitalization initiated by the Southeast Community Organization (SECO), the umbrella organization for the neighborhood associations in Southeast Baltimore. SECO established SET to produce a set of recommendations for the changes needed in the schools in Southeast Baltimore.

Starting in 1995, SET gathered ideas and comments from a wide range of leaders in the Southeast community. SET reviewed education data, held dialogues with principals and conducted interviews with three parents, three students and three teachers at the 16 schools in the Southeast area. In all, over 166 people were interviewed. Late in the same year, SET issued a preliminary report at a community conference attended by 100 residents. The report recommended the following elements be included in a community education agenda for Southeast schools:

1. Building strong school-family-community relationships;
2. Developing school-community programs for advancement of students;

3. Organizing to ensure safe and positive learning environments; and
4. Advocating for more resource for schools.

An informal committee was created by SET to implement the education agenda outlined in the report. The committee includes a core group of 30 community leaders and residents, as well as representatives from community organizations, schools, neighborhood churches and higher education institutions. This group meets monthly and is SET's central leadership and decision-making body.

While conducting a series of follow-up meetings based on the four agenda elements outlined in the report, SET realized parents were not attending their gatherings on a regular basis. Additionally, SET's attempt to attract parents through a partnership with the existing Parent Teacher Association leadership from the local schools proved unsuccessful. (SET later discovered that the local PTAs had had limited success getting parents to their own meetings and into the schools.) Since family and parent engagement is central to SET's agenda, SET studied the pattern of parent participation in their activities to get some insight about their outreach strategies.

Of the participating parents, SET discovered the School/Family Relationships Subcommittee had the most consistent parent attendance. Parents attended the subcommittee meetings because the discussions encouraged and respected parent ideas, concerns and views. Unlike other education topics, the issue of school/family relationships allowed parents to be respected as experts and immediately contribute to the committee's work. SET realized the best method for getting parents involved in their efforts would be to engage them on issues that allow them to be active partners rather than passive listeners.

To identify specific parent needs and concerns about school/family connections, SET turned to community organizing as a strategy to engage parents and the wider community in action around those school issues. In 1996, Citizens Planning and Housing Association joined forces with SECO and the Southeast Education Taskforce to begin an education organizing project.

The SECO director supervised the first SET organizers. Today, SET is an independent entity with SECO and Julie Community Center acting as fiscal agent. Sister Bobbi English, Director of the Julie Community Center, chairs SET and gives direction to the three organizers working in six area schools[4].

[4] SET organizer work in six, Southeast schools - 5 Elementary Schools - Tench Tilghman, Commodore John Rogers, William Paca, General Wolfe, Highlandtown #215 and 1 Middle School- Highlandtown #43

SET's Relational Organizing Model

SET's education organizing is based on the theory that schools provide the most effective educational environment when a mutually supportive relationship exists between the family, the community and the school staff. The role of SET organizing is to build and support productive relationships between families, the community and schools around the common goal of improving student outcomes in Southeast neighborhood schools. SET believes that school staff and administrators must see themselves and the school as community resources that provides a variety of neighborhood services and supports not only to students, but also to community residents. Conversely, parents and community residents must think of neighborhood schools as an undeveloped community asset and work in partnership with them to pressure the city to provide them with sufficient resources.

Using this relational model of organizing, SET aspires to build and maintain collaborative and non-confrontational relationships with school staff, by including them with parents as part of their organizing constituencies. This school/parents constituency mix requires the organizer to manage the difficult task of building the confidence and capacity of parents to voice their own ideas and concerns to principals and the school board, at the same time they are attempting to establish a level of trust between parents and the school staff.

Organizing issues get defined in a process that includes both the parents and the principal at each school. The organizer works to find common ground between parents and the principal and uses that common ground to craft an action agenda.

First, the SET organizer starts by asking the principal if they would like to have an organizer working in the school. Permission from the principal must be obtained before there is any organizing with parents. Additionally, if the principal at anytime decides stop the organizing activities, the SET organizer must not only leave, but must also stop working with the parents on any issues pertaining to that specific school. As Sister Bobbi English explains, "If you don't have the principal of the school working with you, you just can't get anything done in that school." By maintaining positive relations with the school staff, SET believes parents have more opportunities to gain access to the school building and the educational resources schools offer. Additionally, SET does not jeopardize access to schools for other programs needed in the community (e.g., parenting classes, GED classes).

Second, SET organizers work with parents and the school staff to build strong parent organizations within the schools. Organizers try to get parents to join the School Improvement Teams (SIT) and build the capacity of the team to maintain a strong parent base of support for the school. For SET, the SIT team is their vehicle for parent organizing in schools.

Lastly, SET works in collaboration with the principal to recruit parents. SET gets the names and home contact information of parents from the school, and also recruits parents by standing outside of schools, visiting churches and local recreation centers.

One of SET's successful organizing efforts involved William Paca Elementary School. The school was overcrowded for a number of years, sometimes by as much as 100%. The SET organizer, Keith Hunt, went to the principal, who reluctantly agreed to let Keith talk to parents about the overcrowding situation. Keith went door-to-door and talked with parents about the tight conditions at the school. Through this process, he was able to develop strong relationships with parents and community residents. He also engaged the PTA leadership to get them involved in the issue. Working with the support of the school staff, parents and community residents attended school board meetings and pressured public officials to get resources to relieve overcrowding conditions at the school. Their efforts paid off; an addition built at the school now houses 250 students (4th and 5th graders). Other SET organizing issues include building conditions and capacity, bilingual services for parents and special education. Much of their recent organizing has focused on the overcrowding issue in Southeast schools.

> [The] Southeast community launched a comprehensive community plan for revitalization of our neighborhoods through economic development, stabilization of housing and improvement of the quality of life. The community saw our schools as essential anchors in this revitalization effort...
>
> Southeast Community Plan on Education

Coming out of a community planning process, SET tries to connect its school reform activities to a broader vision of community change and revitalization. Therefore, they try to create opportunities for churches, community groups, neighborhood leaders and others who have not been involved in education to see a connection between community building activities and improving neighborhood schools. SET plays the role of community consensus builder on education, then marshals the community resources to move that common agenda forward. SET also carves out roles for community groups and institutions, making it easier for them to participate in school improvement work.

For example, SET established a Church Outreach Work group to assist Southeast congregations in developing partnerships with schools. The SET organizer utilized the Church Committee during a campaign to address the emerging needs of Spanish-speaking parents at General Wolfe Elementary School. The Southeast neighborhoods have seen a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants from Central and South American over the last 10 years. (This influx will likely grow over the next few years when a new resettlement center that will serve thousands of new immigrants opens in Southeast Baltimore next year.) There has been a 33% increase in the Latino student population at General Wolfe over that same period. Many of the parents of those children were unable to participate in meetings and events because of the language barrier. Organizer Dottie Freed, working with Spanish speaking parents at General Wolfe and with the support of the principal, got Spanish-

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speaking pastors to provide translation services for meetings and for school documents sent home to parents.

SET has also established good relationship with teachers in many of the schools where they are organizing. Teachers have attended and presented at parent meetings and are often supportive of parent's needs and desires to help their children do better in schools. For example, when parents expressed concerns about the quality of the curriculum being offered to special education students at William Paca Elementary School, the teachers from the school attended parent meetings to hear their concerns, gave parents information about curriculum options for special education students and helped the parents create a special education support group for the school. SET believes their relational organizing model has created a safer and more positive environment for teachers to work with parents to address the needs of students.

What's Next Steps for SET?

SET is currently working with the BCPS capital improvement office to get a new school built in Southeast to relieve the crowding at Tench Tilghman Elementary School. Originally, the State Department of Education refused on the grounds that Tilghman had a sufficient number of classrooms to accommodate their students, based on the state's formula. When SET examined the issue, they found that the principal, in desperate need of space, was creatively using small spaces throughout the school as classrooms, even though they were not designed for that purpose. Those non-classroom spaces were being included in the State's formula for classroom space calculations. SET convinced the State to walk through the school to see the spaces they were calling classrooms. After the walkthrough, the State agreed to rethink its formula for calculating classrooms and reassess SET's request for a new school.

ACORN and SET are taking very different paths to the same goal--improving the quality of education for low and moderate-income families and neighborhoods. Each group's direction and perspective has been shaped by their individual and collective experiences with the education system. Their similarities and differences in strategies and tactics are directly tied to the similarities and differences in their organizing experiences.

Commonalities

Both ACORN and SET share a common belief that parent and community perspectives must be included in the public education process to affect change in school policies, practices and culture. Without parent and community input, both groups believe that school systems will continue to overlook low-performing, under-resourced schools. The presence of parents and community residents in the process, in their view, ensures at least some level of accountability.

Additionally, both groups concentrate their education organizing in low and moderate-income communities of color. 90% of both group's constituencies consists of African-American parents, with the remaining 10% divided equally between whites and Latinos.

Finally, both SET and ACORN have established positive and productive relationships with university-based partners to help support their organizing work.[5]
Both groups utilize university-based support to help perform technical tasks, such as data analysis or policy research, or to help them with strategic planning. In each case, the university partners do not attempt to define the problems for the groups. Instead, they apply their expertise to help provide clarity about issues identified by the groups themselves. The university partner's commitment to community control over the content of the work stems from their previous experience working with community organizing efforts.

Differences

Origins
ACORN is a part of a national organization located in over 50 cities across the county, set up to organize poor and moderate income people to fight for changes in their communities and lives. The organization has a very clear organizing vision and strategy that they apply to the local setting--organize poor and moderate-income parents and community member to exercise their collective power to demand better resources for their neighborhoods. Their model of organizing has been successful in other settings, so they stick to it. ACORN has applied this model to their education organizing in Baltimore, focusing on building the power of parent and communities to make demands of the school system to improvement their children's education.

SET developed more organically out of a community-based planning process with a goal of "community revitalization." While notions of community power were discussed in this process, the primary drive behind the planning process was to galvanize support from the entire community to invest in community assets and attract resources to improve the quality of life in the neighborhood. As stated in the SET's Plan on Education, the SET education work "is about viewing schools as an

> Schools know that they are under the gun to improve. And the school system has adopted a number of reforms. We feel that they don't need us beating on them. So, we go in and ask how we can use our power to help schools get the resources they need to make the reforms they have in place work more effectively.
>
> Sister Bobbi English SET Chairperson

[5] The foundations of SET came out of work funded by a grant from the Department of Education Urban Community Service Program shared by SECO and the University of Maryland, College Park. Staff from the university helped SET use school data to identify problems in schools and craft its agenda. The support continues today through strategic planning and other forms of research. ACORN, in addition to its work with the National Center for Schools and Communities, got free legal representation from the University of Maryland Law School during its recent appeal to the state to overturn the Baltimore School Committee's vote to close nine schools.

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essential part of [the] community treasury and about casting the community safety and support net securely around them." SET's education organizing operates in a manner consistent with the "schools as community asset" perspective.

Community and Parent Power

ACORN and SET have very different notions about how parents should build and apply their power with regards to schools.

SET attempts to build power for school change by forging alliances between parents, community organizations and residents and key decision-makers in schools, particularly the principal, around commonly shared goals and outcomes for the schools in their neighborhood. Using the partnerships between neighborhood schools and parents as their base of power, SET attempts to leverage more resources for school improvement from BCPS central office and the state. SET believes that building a new culture of respect and collaboration, rather than conflict, between schools and community creates the possibility for real change within a school.

In contrast, ACORN believes low and moderate-income parents must demand access to the school decision-making processes and insist the school system devote the resources necessary to make the schools better. The best way to accomplish this, in ACORN's judgment, is through organizations controlled by low and moderate-income communities. " Parents have been asking for better schools for a long time and have not gotten improvement," observes Mr. Klein," we believe the system is forced to responds when people make clear demands about the kinds of changes they want."

By making strong demands, however, ACORN does not want to eliminate space for discussion and negotiation. "We may drive a set of issues and demands, but sometimes success is getting into a position to negotiate on those issues," notes Mr. Klein. "ACORN believes that there are no permanent allies and no permanent enemies."

Vehicle for Parent Organizing

SET starts their education organizing by taking an "inside school" approach. SET works with parents through the existing parent involvement structures in schools, such as the PTA and School Improvement Teams. Organizers try to work with these structures to create common school improvement agendas with parents and principals. With the support of principals, SET organizers have consistent access to the school building, staff and services. SET organizers can use the school staff and systems to help gather information, conduct meetings and communicate with parents.

However, SET organizers are flexible when it comes to using traditional parent involvement structures. "Parents often felt that principals and staff ran the [SIT] teams and that they were not interested in addressing the issues identified by parents," stated Amber Picou, SET organizer. In response to requests from parents, SET organizers often meet with parents separately from the SIT

and PTA gatherings. While some principals were glad to have parents involved even outside of the formal involvement structures, others complained to the SET committee about the organizers creating "another parent group to deal with" and for giving support to "rabble-rouser" parents. As Baum notes "Many principals have not yet grasped the potential power they could have with parents as their allies."

In contrast, ACORN believes that parents and residents in poor and moderate-income communities must organize themselves independently of the schools and the school system, in order to change the dynamics and balance of power between the education system and communities. "There are few opportunities for parents in low-income neighborhoods to have an organization that they own and the space within that organization to shape their own views on the problems." It is through this independent base of power in communities that parents can make school officials and political leaders accountable for improving poor-performing schools. From ACORN's viewpoint, when members' experience success from their own efforts, it reinforces their commitment to the group and renews their hope that parents and communities do have the power to improve schools.

Decision-making Structure

Meeting monthly to chart their work, SET has an informal committee structure made up mostly of leadership from community organizations and chaired by Sister Bobbi English. By utilizing this existing network of organizations and institutions to move its agenda, SET does not have to put energy and resources into a creating and maintaining its own organizational infrastructure and can concentration more on its educational efforts.

A downside of this informal network is that it tends to limit access to those already a part of the community leadership structure, and can be uninviting to new participants in community activities, including parents. Currently, there are few parents active in SET's leadership body. While parents and organizers are a critical part of their focus, SET concentrates more on getting parents to the schools than into SET's decision-making procedures. "The people who participant in the Taskforce tend to be people we know...the usual suspects, " observed Prof. Baum. "That's a challenge for our organizing work--to activate and train parents to be involved."

ACORN strives to get its members to run the organization, thus giving the organizers and members a more central role in setting the organizing agenda. ACORN is constantly working to get new members into the organization and to a level of self-sufficiency that allows them to articulate and define the issues that frame and drive the local organizing campaigns.

To this end, ACORN tries to provide its members with access to staff and resources that give information and opportunities for strategic thinking and skill development. This type of infrastructure creates an environment in which members can increase their own leadership capabilities and capacities needed to solve the kinds of problems they encounter in their schools and

communities. The more people with access to this infrastructure, the more people will develop skills that can build powerful action for communities.

However, while this structure is accessible to new people and helps build leadership and ownership, it is labor intensive and requires a constant stream of resources to be maintained. As described by Mr. Klein, "We try to always try to have a timeline for work in the long term, but it is a constant challenge being able to allocate enough resources to stay focused at the same time we respond to priorities in communities."

Challenges

Both ACORN and SET identified some of the key obstacles to their efforts to improve schools in Baltimore. They include:

Uncertain and Changing Political Environment

Given the many changes in the city's political and educational leadership over the last 5 years, both groups have struggled to clarify the schools system's long-term vision and direction. This has resulted in a limited ability of the groups to create relationships at a district level and to create long-term plans for their own organizing effort. "We have got a new mayor; the School System CEO quit and a new one started last summer. [Just as we] are getting started, people leave," observes Mr. Klein.

School System's Limited View of Parental Involvement

While both groups have worked with school staff open to working in partnership with parents and communities, both groups have experienced a school culture that is not accepting of real parent and community engagement. "There is a high degree of paranoia in the school system," notes Prof. Baum. "School culture treats even the most benign outsider as the enemy."

Even when parents and communities participate in school activities, the traditional structures often fail to create useful or lasting connections between teachers, school staff and families. "The school system does not get parent involvement'" laments Ms. Picou, "the focus is on numbers, not quality"

Tentative and Inexperienced School Leadership

The parents and community members are even more likely to be viewed as suspicion "outsiders" to school staff in schools with a history of poor performance and a newly appointed or first-time principal. "The fact that many principals are new and in poor performing school makes them even more anxious about the possible dangers presented by outsiders," observes Prof. Baum. Even when school leadership encourages the school improvement efforts of parents, principals are often very tentative about the public support they will give to actions that in any way appear to challenge the school or school system. Ms. Picou comments, "We've had good experiences with principals

supporting [our] work, but most are not going to be involved in efforts that appear to go against the system."

The Challenge of Education Organizing

Both groups recognize the difficult task of attempting to improve the Baltimore City School System--a system with enormous challenges and limited resources. "[Our] biggest challenge is the severity of the problem and trying to put it into bite size chucks," comments Mr. Klein. Both groups grapple with maintaining their constituency's energy and hope in the face of the seemingly endless struggle to improve schools.

Long-term Organizing vs. Short-term Funding

Both groups felt that funders of their work need to better understand that organizing is a long-term process. To support the efforts of parents, families and communities to make real and lasting improvements in schools requires investments for more than a one or two year grant cycle. Resources are needed for:

- Training and development of organizers and community constituency;
- Decent salaries and benefits for organizer. "To get quality people, you have to pay them a sufficient salary."
- Organizational development and capacity building.

"We're a long way from institutional change," remarks Mr. Klein. "Finding institutional partners that have the same long-term goals is our challenge"

The challenges to education organizing are complex. The uncertain political environment heightens the paranoia and tentativeness of school staff toward any outside voices calling for change. Limited resources force both community organizing groups and schools to have small, overworked staffs who attempt to address massive student and community needs. In essence, the challenges to community organizing for school reform are the same as those facing the school system—identifying institutions willing to commit long-term resources to sustain educational improvement efforts.

ADDITIONAL EDUCATION EFFORTS IN BALTIMORE

Baltimore Education Network (BEN) is a citywide network of individuals and organizations committed to ensuring parent and community engagement in Baltimore City school reform. One of BEN's most successful accomplishments has been their work with Study Circles, a highly structured small group discussion on a particular topic, aimed at moving people from thought to action. BEN has trained over 40 Study Circles facilitators and has partnered with BCPSS to explore offering them throughout the school system. BEN is now working closely with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to integrate Study Circles into their Making Connections neighborhoods, including work with SET in Southeast Baltimore. Additionally, BEN is working to secure a BEN contact at each of the BCPS 185 schools; these contacts can be on a fax/email list and receive regular updates and alerts about school board meetings, legis lation, upcoming events, etc.

Citizens Planning and Housing Association (CPHA) has been an important citywide organizing and advocacy force in Baltimore for over sixty years. CPHA is well known for being an integrated, inclusive organization and has worked on a wide range of issues that include housing policy, regionalism, anti-drug organizing, community leadership training, billboard control, youth organizing, anti-liquor organizing (for alcohol regulation), recycling, and myriad other city issues. In the mid-80's, CPHA recognized that education had to become a top priority as the organization dedicated itself to its mission of improving the quality of life for city residents. CPHA has led numerous school reform efforts and is probably best known for its organizing work around the New Schools Initiative, an opportunity for local groups of parents and teachers, or non-profit organizations to create and run innovative, autonomous, small public schools.

Fund for Educational Excellence (FFEE) is Baltimore's local public education fund. Several years ago, FFEE developed a standards-based model of whole school reform called Achievement First. This model uses site-based professional development focused on literacy, principal coaching, and standards in practice training (as developed by the Education Trust) for staff and parents. FFEE has worked closely with BCPSS and is now implementing Achievement First in almost 30 city schools. In order to meet the need for parent and staff training on standards, FFEE trained a cadre of community education leaders (from BEN, CPHA, the Maryland Disability Law Center, the Parent and Community Advisory Board, etc.) to do the standards training at schools and in communities. The training was met with overwhelming interest and seemed like an excellent starting place for organizing parents around school reform. While FFEE has not continued this work, there is still a trained and experienced group of education leaders who would like to see the work continue, as a part of a larger organizing effort.

Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), an Industrial Areas Foundation affiliate, is a broad-based community organization whose members include more than 40 churches and congregations, labor organizations and other associations. BUILD has looked closely at the

IAF's outstanding work in Texas around school reform and has explored the possibility of doing similar work in Baltimore. However, BUILD leaders never felt the conditions were favorable in Baltimore for such an effort. In 1996, BUILD established the Baltimore Child First Authority as a private nonprofit organization able to receive dedicated funds and bonds from the state and city for programs for youth. Its focus is to use public schools as community hubs for enriching educational, recreational, cultural, civic and family activities for public school children after-school hours. The goal for Child First was that these after-school programs would be the footholds for parent organizing in the schools. However, BUILD, not anticipating the huge amount of work required to develop and run quality after-school programs, has not made much progress in creating a citywide body of organized parents to demand school reform.

Baltimore City Alliance for Excellence in Education is a newly formed organization that holds monthly meetings for education advocates across the city. BEN, CHAI (a community organization in Northwest Baltimore), and Greater Homewood have taken a lead role in organizing this effort. The meetings are an attempt to build citywide interest and support for education reform, organizing, network, and to share information about work being done in communities. (CPHA ran a monthly network of community organizers for several years, inspiring this effort to do the same, specifically for education organizers.)

TABLES

Table 1: Scope of Organizing Work

	Single Issue	Multi Issues	Local organizing	Citywide organizing
SET				
ACORN				

Table 2: Baltimore Education Organizing Issues

• **Facilities and school climate** • Overcrowding • Playgrounds • Plumbing
• **Improving teaching and learning in low performing schools** • Number of uncertified teacher • Class size reduction • Academic standards and performance • Special Education resource
• **Equity** • Suspensions • Technology access/Digital Divide • Funding • Translation Service
• **Access and Accountability** • Principal and staff attitudes towards parents • Parental access into schools and school staff • Parent involvement in school and district policy decisions

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